

Dark days for Rhode Island

In the past few weeks, we have seen state government at its worst in Rhode Island. Headlines about sweetheart contracts and exorbitant legal fees have made a daily parade across the front page of The Providence Journal. While the Democrat-dominated General Assembly and Republican governor seem to be collectively asleep, state departments are blithely spending astronomical amounts of money on contracts that benefit the private sector at the expense of the taxpayer. Indeed, any one of the insider contracts disclosed by The Journal could help plug the budget deficit looming over the state.

In the past few weeks, the revelations have piled up:

- The state Department of Transportation has done \$6.6 million in business with Plexus Corp., a company with close ties to DOT Chief Engineer Edmund T. Parker Jr., without ever going out to bid.
- The state Department of Environmental Management has hired a Washington, D.C., law firm that it anticipates could cost the state more than \$3.5 million to force a Texas company to clean up toxic soil in Tiverton. This expenditure, too, has never gone out to bid.
- Last year, the Federal Highway Administration wrote an audit advising DOT that it needed more in-house experts and should stop using consultants for oversight work that should be done by staff. The agency did not share the report with the governor or the public.

Of course, this is in addition to the state's multi-million-dollar temporary staffing contract, also awarded without a bid, this time under the governor's watch.

But as Rhode Island sinks ever deeper into a budget deficit, what was the response of the General Assembly and the administration? Governor Carcieri targeted social programs for cuts from the beginning, going after the weakest members of society, those without a strong lobbying presence on Smith Hill:

Youths in foster care, for example, and parents who can't afford child care. When those measures proved unpopular, he proposed laying off 1,000 state workers. And you can be sure that these wouldn't be the \$100K policy aides working in the governor's office; they would be rank-and-file state workers who tend patients at state hospitals and patch holes in bridges.

The General Assembly, meanwhile, didn't do much better. These men and women cut another \$19 million in state education and passed a measure that would allow 17-year-olds to be tried as adults and sent to the Adult Correctional Institutions simply to save money. They are essentially freezing state aid to school districts at the same time the legislature is limiting municipalities' ability to raise funds through taxation.

And yet, when it came time to pass the hat, our leaders in the General Assembly refused to make any sacrifices of their own. In fact, they refused to pass a bill that would have required legislators to pay a part of the state-financed health insurance offered to elected officials.

It is absolutely maddening to be told, over and over again, by state officials that we all must sacrifice, and then open up our statewide newspaper to read about another multi-million-dollar insider contract enriching the few. The governor, at least, has made an effort to get at government waste, through his Fiscal Fitness program and a task force investigating DOT spending. But his initiatives come across as too little, too late. Clearly neither he nor our legislators have any idea what is going on in his cabinet.

Rhode Islanders deserve a balanced budget that does not rely on sleight of hand or victimization of the poor to achieve its end. Rhode Islanders deserve responsible government that serves the public instead of individual self-interest. Rhode Islanders deserve better, period, and our elected officials should hang their heads in shame for allowing this financial debacle to come to pass.

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A. 2